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QUESTIONS IN THE CLOSET

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The plot to kill Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, hidden for 10 years from the public, raises some ugly questions that high officials would rather keep buried deep inside the CIA.

¶Has the CIA tried to assassinate any other leaders? John McCone, who headed the CIA during the six attempts to knock off Castro, denied emphatically that the CIA had tried to kill anyone.

But ex-Senator George Smathers, one of John F. Kennedy's closest friends, told us the late President suspected that the CIA had arranged the shootings of the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo in 1961 and South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

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¶**Did President Kennedy personally** sanction the plot against Castro? The preparations to assassinate the Cuban dictator began during the last months of the Eisenhower Administration as part of the Bay of Pigs scheme.

All six attempts, however, were made during 1961-63 when Kennedy occupied the White House. Smathers told us he once spoke to the late President about assassinating Castro.

Kennedy merely rolled back his eyes, recalled Smathers, as if to indicate the idea was too wild to discuss. Subsequently, Kennedy told Smathers of his suspicion that the CIA may have been behind the Trujillo and Diem assassinations.

¶Did the late Robert Kennedy know about the assassination attempts? After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President Kennedy swore to friends he would like "to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds."

He put his brother, Robert, in charge of the CIA with instructions to shake it up. The CIA made five attempts on Castro's life after the Bay of Pigs while Robert Kennedy was riding herd on the agency.

¶Could the plot against Castro have backfired against President Kennedy? The late President was murdered nine months after the last assassination team was caught on a Havana rooftop with high-powered rifles. Presumably, they were subjected to torture until they told all they knew.

None of the assassination teams, however, had direct knowledge of the CIA involvement. The CIA instigators had represented themselves as oilmen seeking revenge against Castro for his seizure of oil holdings.

Former associates recall that Robert Kennedy, deeply despondent, went into semi-seclusion after his brother's assassination. Could he have been tormented by more than natural grief?

He certainly learned that the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been active in the pro-Castro movement and had traveled to Mexico to visit the Cuban embassy a few weeks before the dreadful day in Dallas.

Could Bob Kennedy have been plagued by the terrible thought that the CIA plot, which he must at least have condoned, put into motion forces that may have brought about his brother's martyrdom?

The last surviving brother, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), could give us no insight. His brothers had never spoken to him about any assassination attempt against Castro, he said. He was aware, he volunteered, only that Senator Smathers had talked to the late President about eliminating Castro.

Smathers told us that President Kennedy seemed "horrified" at the idea of political assassinations. "I remember him saying," recalled Smathers, "that the CIA frequently did things he didn't know about, and he was unhappy about it. He complained that the CIA was almost autonomous.

"He told me he believed the CIA had arranged to have Diem and Trujillo bumped off. He was pretty well shocked about that. He thought it was a stupid thing to do, and he wanted to get control of what the CIA was doing."

But McCone, disagreeing vigorously, told us that "no plot was authorized or implemented" to assassinate Castro, Trujillo, Diem or anyone else.

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"During these days of tension, there was a wide spectrum of plans ranging from one extreme to another," McCone admitted. "Whenever this subject (assassinating Castro) was brought up —and it was—it was rejected immediately on two grounds. First, it would not be condoned by anybody. Second, it wouldn't have achieved anything."

There was also talk in high places, McCone acknowledged, of supporting a coup to oust Diem. The former CIA director said he had argued against this at a secret session with both Kennedy brothers. He had contended that there was no one strong enough to take Diem's place and that a coup, therefore, would bring "political upheaval."

"I told the President and Bobby together," recalled McCone, "that if I were running a baseball team and had only one pitcher, I wouldn't take him out of the game."